

BILLINGS (J.S.)

THE
Military Medical Officer
AT THE
Opening of the Twentieth Century

*Address to the graduating class of the Army Medical School
at Washington, April 14, 1903.*

By DR. JOHN S. BILLINGS LL.D., D.C.L.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL IN THE UNITED STATES ARMY, RETIRED;
DIRECTOR OF THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY.



*Reprint from the
Journal of the Association of Military Surgeons
of the United States*

CARLISLE, PENNSYLVANIA
THE ASSOCIATION OF MILITARY SURGEONS
1903

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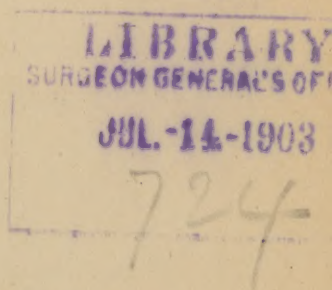
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By DR. JOHN S. BILLINGS, LL.D., D.C.L.,

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I SUPPOSE that it is entirely within the bounds of possibility that some forty or fifty years hence some member of this class will come back here to give the address to the graduating class of that date. I am not specially curious as to which one of you gentlemen will perform that duty,—but I should very much like to know what he will say—if I did, I could probably make a very interesting address myself, although I might have to make a very careful selection for fear of being thought a crank. I can hardly imagine what Dr. McLaren, the President of the Army Medical Board which examined me, would have thought if I had tried to answer some of his questions as you would probably answer them. He thought that great progress had been made since he entered the service at the beginning of the Florida War, and that we young fellows were going into the War of the Rebellion with great advantages. He had seen the introduction of anesthesia, and was enthusiastic over the comparatively new operations for excision of joints. He had just heard of the clinical thermometer, but doubted whether it would be of much use, and had also heard of the hypodermic syringe; and when he found I had one of these instruments, he went to Surgeon General Finley (this was in 1861,) and had me assigned to duty at the hospital under his charge so that he might see how these new things actually worked. If, however, in answering his question as to the means of preventing malaria and typhoid fevers among troops, I had referred to bacilli, haematozoa, flies and mosquitoes, as you would probably do, I don't think I should have passed,

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and if I had referred to antitoxin as a means of treating malignant sore throat (his name for diphtheria), he would have advised me to take a six months' rest in an asylum. I was asked to describe laudable pus and the best means of securing healing by the second intention. Have any of you ever seen any laudable pus? Certainly my knowledge of medicine in those days before you were born was not great as compared with yours, but when I went to the army of the Potomac I found a few doctors who knew less, as appeared from the results of a certain examining board of which I was a member.

When the war was over and the armies of Grant and Sherman had made their last parade, when, thirty-eight years ago to-day, President Lincoln was assassinated, and at last rested in the peace of death, and the old Ford's Theatre was occupied by the Army Medical Museum and Library, the younger medical officers in the museum became busy with investigations, and it is interesting to remember some of the problems which occupied them. One was the comparison of high power microscopic objectives as tested on Nobert's lines; another was the best way of making photo-micrographs; a third was the best method of staining and mounting tissues. I clearly recollect the feelings of triumph with which I took some slides of stained sections of kidney and intestines mounted in balsam to Dr. Woodward, who had been very incredulous as to the possibility of making such preparations. Then Dr. Edward Curtis and myself began the study of minute fungi and of Texas cattle fever, looked for the malarial organisms on Analostan Island, and spent much time on bacteria, following Pasteur's method. In the absence of the solid isolating culture methods devised by Koch, we were groping blindly, but I have not regretted the time spent in this groping. It is impossible for you to appreciate the feelings with which we read Koch's first papers, or with which we viewed the commencement and progress of antiseptic surgery.

When I graduated in medicine I had to write a thesis, and for divers and sundry reasons, I chose to write on the surgical treatment of epilepsy. I undertook to get the history of all reported cases of such treatment, and in trying to do that I discov-

ered that there was no library in the United States which contained all the reports. There were no complete files of medical journals in this country, and any man who really wanted to write a scholarly book on medicine had to go to London or Paris for his data. It seemed that that condition of things should be improved, and when I came here in the Surgeon General's Office and was detailed to settling the medical accounts of the war, I put in some side time in trying to get this library together.

The work which was done in the old Ford's Theatre in the latter sixties and the seventies, in connection with the Museum and Library was in part merely incidental to the preparation of medical and surgical history of the war, in part for the advancement of medicine, and in part for the pleasure of the young men engaged in it. Its direct results on the science and art of medicine were not great, but its indirect results have been and are important. This Army Medical Museum and Library are well known to physicians all over the world, and the opportunities they have afforded and the aid which they have given to physicians in the United States have been such as to produce in the medical profession a strong interest in the Army Medical Department. It is desirable for all parties that this interest should be maintained, and to this end the younger members of the Medical Corps should know and feel that this Army Medical Museum and Library is an inheritance to be cared for and increased by them for their own and the general good. One of the good things about this Army Medical School is that it brings the Assistant Surgeons in touch with this institution, giving it some of the features of a central home club.

Thirty years ago there were considerable difficulties in obtaining funds for this Institution. I look back at my experience with Congressional appropriation committees with more amusement than I felt at the time. At present I am told that the difficulty is to obtain the funds required to provide shelving for the books, rather than to obtain the books. This is also amusing.

When I asked for suggestions as to what I should talk to you about, I was told:—"Oh, the usual thing, congratulations and advice."

As for my congratulations,—you have them,—and they are sincere. It is really a very fine thing to be a young army medical officer, although there are, occasionally, short periods of time when he may not think so: He may have some doubts about it after he has been for a year at some small, isolated, very healthy post, or, for a month before his examination for promotion, or when he has to decide without advice as to what he will do for his first case of strangulated hernia, or of incipient melancholia, or of shot-wound of the abdomen, or of locked twins. He may even more than doubt it when he takes a stereoscopic view of his contemplated marriage on the one side and his salary and prospects on the other. These doubts will pass, but as a rule he will not know clearly what a good time he is having and what a fortunate man he is until he looks back over his career across the gulf of twenty or thirty years.

If it is true, and I think it is, that “a spice of danger and an element of chance add interest to work,” then your work will have that interest. You are not coming on the stage of action at the beginning of a period of peace and content, but in the midst of a waxing tide of national struggles for commercial supremacy and of discontent among great masses of people. “That this turmoil and unrest can be dealt with wisely and justly, so as to preserve that which is most desirable in civilization and in our system of representative government, I believe, but here and there in special localities, the immediate problems must probably be solved by blood and steel, and that you will have a part to play in some of these is not at all unlikely.”

You will have some epidemics to face, and no doubt some of you will have a chance to hear bullets whistle, arbitration to the contrary notwithstanding, but the increased interest which these things may give to an army surgeon's life is too uncertain and temporary to be worth consideration. The things most to be dreaded in your future lives are boredom and waiting, and the preventive and remedy is to see to it that you have something to do always,—and doing it./ It may be, generally must be, routine, like a woman's knitting work; sketching or photography, Indian languages or calculus, infusoria or ascomycetes will any of them

keep you busy. But suggesting subjects for work is a little like the plan of the man who told James Russell Lowell that he had discovered the way to make a fortune. "As the fine flavor of the canvass-back is due to the wild celery on which it feeds, I am going to feed tame ducks with it and supply the market." Some weeks later Lowell met him and asked him how the duck feeding plan was getting on. "Well," was the answer, "they wouldn't eat it."

Forty years ago the microscope was mainly used by physicians as a plaything, a source of occasional amusement. It was the correct thing for the young graduate to buy a thirty dollar Oberhauser, and keep it in a conspicuous place in his office, but his chief use of it was to show his admiring friends the terrible monsters contained in a drop of selected water.

To-day the microscope is one of our most important tools, and you have been taught how to use it, but it may be well to remind you that you can get a great deal of pleasure by using it in research work not directly connected with medicine.

When you obtained your diploma as Doctor of Medicine, it is possible that many of you thought you knew it all, or nearly all, and that what you did not know could be found in the latest text books, monographs and journals. Probably all of you are now aware that there are many things in regard to the causes, prevention and treatment of disease which, at present, nobody knows; or if any one does know, he has not told. There is no end to the things we don't know and ought to know, and probably will know within your lifetime.

Some of you have, perhaps, resolved that you will investigate some of these unsettled questions, and may have even selected the particular problem which you intend to solve. This is good, very good, but remember that in your life as an army medical officer the subject for investigation will usually be determined by your opportunities rather than by your wishes. I advise every young army surgeon to have some research work on hand, for his own mental health and pleasure, just as I advise him to take a certain amount of physical exercise, and if he cannot make the particular research he would most like, that he try to like the

research he can make. Of course his selection of a subject for study will be largely involuntary; if he feels a strong impulse towards some special line of work, it is well for him to follow it, but if this work has no relation to his military duties he must bear in mind that these duties have precedence. The fact that he is an enthusiastic botanist, ornithologist, or comparative anatomist, is no reason whatever for his neglecting to keep himself well informed as to advances in medical science, or not being interested in his patients or in the sanitary condition of his post. It is also a very poor reason why he should try to obtain posts which are specially favorable to his particular hobby, if this hobby is not connected with military medicine. If he considers his research work more important than his army duties, he should resign from the latter.

What amount of time and energy should be given to original research work by professional men employed in college and university work and in Government departments is a question which has been much discussed of late years. The exceptional man, who knows all that is known on some one subject and has the capacity and the desire to increase knowledge on that subject, and for whom many of our Universities and large manufacturing and engineering establishments are seeking, is not easily found, and when found it is not more than an even chance that he can be trusted to fulfill the ordinary every day duties of his profession, including administrative work.

If any of you feel satisfied that you are that sort of man he had better communicate with the Carnegie Institution.

Most of us hold our professional work as the first and most important object, and original research as a thing to be done as opportunity offers. We belong to the second class mentioned in Hesiod, i. e., those who can understand things when explained to them.

I shall not attempt to advise you with regard to your special medical, sanitary or surgical work, but merely ask you to remember that every army medical officer has some special opportunities for increasing knowledge, but that to enable him to recognize these opportunities and to take advantage of them usually

requires long study and training. It was because of this study and training that your late teacher and friend Dr. Walter Reed, was able to recognize his opportunity and to make the discovery with regard to yellow fever which has placed his name high on the roll of the famous physicians who have been great benefactors to mankind. His work on this subject was not done under direction, rather in spite of it, yet the line of work in which he had been engaged for the previous ten years was what fitted him for the emergency.

These special opportunities always come to the physician, the naturalist, the anthropologist, they are connected with phenomena which are occasional—rarely just alike and must be secured at the time or be lost. But you must be able to recognize them if you are to use them. Remember the motto of the Washington City Directory “To find a name in this book you must know how to spell it.”

Permit me to say a word about your social relations and duties, which are substantially those of the family practitioner, but with some special peculiarities. In time of war the surgeon is more intimately associated with line officers and their work than are the officers of other staff corps, and to a certain extent this is also true in time of peace, and as a general rule they are good friends. In my time there were two or three commanding officers who always had difficulties with medical officers, unless they were sick, but so they did with all other officers. There were also two or three medical officers who always had difficulties with their commanding officers, although they might be on very friendly terms with other officers. These gentlemen were sensitive on questions of rank, and rights, not so much on their own account (as they explained), as because they felt it to be their duty to uphold the dignity of the Medical Department. Now the nature of either personal or Departmental dignity, and the desire to have all of one's rights, is such that the more attention you give to them the more they seem to require, and it becomes hard to spare the time necessary to preserve them spotless and unfrayed.

Your military rank may, on rare occasions, be an important

matter in dealing with the rank and file, but your medical skill and tact are more important in the ordinary routine of army life.

It is your duty to contribute your quota towards the social life of your post, and to try to make it cheerful and interesting. Of course, your personal likes and dislikes, strength or weakness, in such matters as athletics and games, shooting and whist, reading clubs and amateur theatricals, the nieces of the Major's wife, and other sources of amusement, will have much influence on your actions,—but be ready to give some of your time to things you don't care much about, if it is for the general good and pleasure. You have got to take into consideration the opinions, feelings and desires of some women as well as the men, but the only piece of advice I can give on this point is,—whenever you find yourself thinking that you thoroughly understand the ladies,—or a lady,—at your post, you had better not prophesy.

You have also certain social duties in connection with the soldiers under your charge. You should know them by sight and name, and you should be interested in their individual peculiarities. And this should be a real interest,—the soldier is quick to detect perfunctory, patronizing forms of apparent interest. Why does Smith sulk or mope and get off by himself as much as possible? Why has Brown suddenly become quarrelsome? How is Jones the new recruit getting on? "These matters are the business of the line officers," you will say. They are, but they should also interest the medical officer, who, without impertinent inquisitiveness, and with tactful sympathy, can often make the rough path smooth, and help his brother officer to form a wise judgment.

The medical officer may also have social and professional duties in connection with civilians in the vicinity of his post. At a few special places his medical services are in much demand by civilians and are paid for, wherefore these places are desired by army surgeons. If there are other physicians in the vicinity, and there are few places where there are not, they may think that the army surgeon's work should be confined to the limits of his post, and professional jealousy with a little mixture of the Code of Ethics, has in bygone years, caused trouble to the medical officer.

On the other hand you will find that such jealousy is the exception and not the rule, and that if you sympathize with what interests your professional brethren; wherever you may be, you will receive cordial sympathy and aid from them. You are "members of a world-wide guild, the oldest one, and the only one." The medical officer has thus a double comradeship, and this is one of the specially attractive features of his position.

Your attendance at this Army Medical school will have other results besides increase of professional knowledge. You have become more or less acquainted with each other's personality, more than you could otherwise have done in many years, and I hope you have formed some friendships which will endure.

Probably you will never all come together again in this life, after you have taken your different routes over the iron lines that bind this country to its Capital, but your paths will cross each other many times and in unforeseen places. At each crossing may your memory of your Washington experience aid in making the meeting a happy one.

As members of a great profession, as officers of the nation, as citizens of a great country, as men possessing special knowledge and selected from many candidates, you are coming on the stage of action to share the burden and responsibility of the world's work, to bring fresh blood and energy into the organism, to maintain and add to the dignity and honor of your corps and of your country. Enter upon your heritage modestly, but confidently. Be strong and of good courage. "*Nos morituri salutamus.*"



